

So, reduce the population, leave me with the money I have now, and in return I can promise to make a real difference with those with us long enough to come off drugs and get into drug treatment, perhaps to go through a offending behaviour course or to start, what is in most cases, the first serious education in their lives, and as a result we will make them employable and remove the social exclusion. That would be to provide the sort of Prison Service I hoped I was joining 20

years ago and which for the first time in the last few years I thought was on the horizon. We dare not miss this chance to turn aspiration and potential into reality. We look both to the young people in our care, most of whom have had precious little chance in life, but also to the communities, those same young people, will pray upon unless we can turn their lives around. If we can do that, that would be a future for prisons and criminal justice which made real sense.

The Experiment

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The Stanford Prison Experiment

In 1971, Professor Philip Zimbardo turned the basement of the psychology faculty at Stanford University into a 'prison'. He recruited guards and prisoners from his student base, and ran what became known as the Stanford Prison Experiment as a means of testing the psychological argument that in the 'right' situation, normally rational, fair and decent people could become something different — tyrannical, despotic, or even 'evil'.

Things turned sour rather quickly. With only a very basic training, the guards began to emulate prison guards from the movies, acting out what they thought were the appropriate roles of guards. Prisoner participants were subjected to humiliating and degrading performances to gratify the guards and to reinforce this most vivid of power relationships.

Zimbardo placed himself in the midst of the Experiment, as the prison's superintendent. He admits that he became thoroughly absorbed into this new position, and became immune to the treatment being given to the prisoners. So enthralled was he in the events unfolding, he called in a colleague to witness the regime. The response of his colleague, utterly abhorrent of the treatment of the prisoners, brought Zimbardo back to his psychologist self, and he called a halt to the Experiment after just a few days.

The original Experiment was not made for television. Zimbardo did record the goings-on on video tape for the purposes of his own research. But the Experiment quickly achieved notoriety and became known to psychology students across the globe. Not long after the Experiment sprung a new band — called the Stanford Prison Experiment.

Zimbardo remains at Stanford University today, and is currently the President of the American Psychological Association. From the start, he has roundly condemned the BBC's plans to 'recreate' the Experiment, saying — in broad terms — that they should learn from his mistakes.

This warning was heeded. Two academics, Dr Alex Haslam of St Andrew's University, and Professor Steve Reicher of Exeter University, became 'the experimenters'. The Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter were sent plans for the BBC Experiment, and following significant amendments, gave agreement. The BBC also agreed to appoint an Independent Ethics Panel to monitor the planning and filming of the Experiment. Such ethical safeguards were essential not only for the protection of the participants, but also to ensure that the BBC's Experiment did not become as infamous as the original Californian experiment.

The BBC's Prison Experiment

Like many people, the first I had known of this new Experiment was when an article appeared in a supplement to *The Guardian* last autumn. In November, I was approached by the Series Producer, and asked if I would join the Independent Ethics Panel to oversee both planning and production of the programme. After a long chat over coffee, I agreed.

The Independent Ethics Panel consisted of five people, each with a different area of expertise. The Panel was chaired by Lembit Öpik, a Liberal Democrat MP and something of an expert in power relationships. I was appointed through my work with the Howard League for Penal Reform, and my work on prisoners' rights. The other three members were, Dr Mark McDermott of the University of East London, and previously an advisor on the 'Human Zoo' series; Dr Stephen Smith of Beth Shalom, the Holocaust Memorial Centre, and an acclaimed commentator on genocide and human rights; and Andrea Wills, of the BBC's independent Editorial Policy Unit.

We first met at Broadcasting House in late November, when we had the opportunity to meet 'the Experimenters', and the BBC production team. The vetting and selection process for the participants was explained to us. We read through the draft 'Guard's

Handbook' and discussed, at some length, the parameters for punishments and the treatment of prisoners. In the changed world post-11 September, we considered the appropriate course of action if a major news item broke. We negotiated contractually embedded powers by which we could call the whole thing to a halt if we believed it necessary, and agreed the means by which we would make unannounced visits to the set each day during the filming process. The difference between the BBC's Experiment, and that of Zimbardo, was striking: the BBC met all the terms we demanded, and they were clearly as keen to avoid a repeat of the Stanford Experiment's excesses.

Participants were selected from those who responded to an advertisement in *The Sunday Mirror* (which has the most demographically broad readership of any Sunday national newspaper), headed 'Do You Really Know Yourself?'. All were subjected to rigorous screening to weed out anyone likely to have preconceived ideas about 'prison', or who might otherwise be unsuitable, such as those with racist or homophobic views. No-one with experience of prison — whether as prisoner or guard — was accepted. Those short-listed were interviewed by independent clinical psychologists from London hospitals. Above all, although they were all warned that it would be 'tough', none were told that they would be entering a 'prison' environment.

The set was built at the George Lucas Stage at Elstree Studios in London. The Independent Ethics Panel met at the Studios for one final meeting before the filming commenced, and we were given a tour of the set 24 hours before the participants were due to arrive. We were locked in a cell; we jumped on the beds; we tried to break out. It was impressive, and well built. Our only concern was the excessive heat caused by the lighting but, we were told, air conditioning was on its way.

We agreed our own confidential rota for visiting the set, unannounced, each day. Members of the Independent Ethics Panel were given access passes to get onto the site. Paramedics, fire fighters, and security guards stood by 24 hours a day. The two independent clinical psychologists shared an outside broadcast truck with the Panel, and monitored events for up to 20 hours each day, making extensive notes. The facilities in the truck made it possible for us to listen to any participants' microphone at any time, and monitor all cameras within the set. A team of 'loggers' worked in another truck, recording the minutiae of the goings-on. We had access to these logs at any time, and also video recordings of the previous 48 hours.

The Experimenters, Haslam and Reicher, had their own room within the studios, seen frequently throughout the programmes. It was important for the Independent Ethics Panel to visit and discuss happenings with them — and they found it useful to have feedback and discussions with us. We also had full access to the producers, Gaby Koppel and Nick

Mirsky, and Panel members were sent regular email updates of the events within the 'prison'.

The Panel exercised its unannounced visits right with some vigour, with visits ranging from 5am to 2am. We were there to observe, and to ensure that due weight was being given to ethical matters, and that the participants were being cared for. But aside from that, it was also compulsive. To listen to and watch the discussions and events unfolding — such as prisoner Bimpson's explanation of the meaning of Orwell's *Animal Farm* — was enthralling.

Some issues of ethical concern did arise, such as the death of the grandmother of one of the participants, and the experimenter's decision to end the Experiment one day earlier than planned. (Participants were told the Experiment would run for 14 days — the intention was always ten. The participants were told 14 to avoid them 'winding down' on day nine.) Other matters were referred to the Panel, such as when one participant asked for some money in his personal property to be paid into a bank. Thankfully, there were no incidents of major ethical concern, although we were both equipped and prepared in the event of a major incident.

The Experiment drew to a close on day nine, on a cold Saturday morning in mid-December. I was on-set from 6am on the final day, and watched the participants get ready to leave the set. All participants had an extensive debrief, followed by a chat with the producers and experimenters. Then it was out into the cold for publicity photographs and to meet the participants who had left the set earlier.

I sat for a while with the participants in the green room. They made calls to family and friends, and exchanged contact details with each other. I asked them what they had missed the most whilst 'incarcerated'. The internet; news; family; sex; coffee; and vodka. Most were planning to spend their participation fee on a good Christmas. By three o'clock that afternoon, all were on their way home.

The substantial part of The Experiment was over. We now had to wait for the programmes to be made, which would involve the cutting of more than 2000 hours of tape.

The Independent Ethics Panel met on four occasions post-broadcast. In March, we met at Broadcasting House to watch the four programmes, and raised a number of objections to the planned programmes. This delayed broadcast by a further month, and meant that at least one programme had to be virtually completely remade. The balance between 'science' and 'reality tv' needed to be addressed, and some participant's portrayals were, unflattering. As far as we were concerned, ethics extended to the point of broadcast — and possibly beyond.

We met twice at Portcullis House in Westminster, to discuss our feelings about the programmes in more detail, and to plan our report. Once complete, we then had the opportunity to watch the second edition of the

programmes. We were pleased to see that most of our concerns had been addressed, and then set about writing our own Report, for submission to the BBC and also as a public document.

Defending 'The Experiment'

The programme quality, or scientific integrity of The Experiment, was not of concern to the Independent Ethics Panel. Our remit was clearly defined, within parameters to ensure the welfare of all participants. But in working on such an exciting project, it became clear that we did have our own opinions on issues outside our remit. Whilst I cannot speak for the rest of the Panel, I have certainly spent some time defending some criticisms of The Experiment.

Some commentators have said that it was not representative of a 'real' prison, a charge which I accept. But it was not meant to be like a 'real' prison — although with the current prison population, three-to-a-cell is not unknown. But what the experimenters set out to achieve was an examination of power relationships within a closed — or total — institution. The set did not have to be realistic in that respect. Those who expected a mix of 'Porridge' with 'Big Brother' will, I think, have been disappointed.

A further charge is that the participants will have 'played to the cameras', which I find a fair criticism. There are two responses. First, it is interesting from a psychological perspective to see how the participants acted in the knowledge that they were being filmed. If the participants were less violent, or less confrontational because they were being filmed, then there is perhaps a lesson to be learned for those concerned with rooting out violence from penal institutions — surveillance may prevent violent behaviour. As one prisoner wrote to me, 'If you had cameras on real screws all of the time THAT would alter THEIR behaviour as well'.

Second, although not shown on the end programmes, I witnessed several occasions when participants were discussing issues 'quietly', and then suddenly remembered that they were wearing a microphone. In much the same way that Zimbardo absorbed his role of prison superintendent, there was an element in which the surroundings and the uniform allowed the participants to absorb the roles they had been given.

'The promise of serious science has been broken', wrote one broadsheet reviewer. In making the television programmes, the producers had to be conscious of the audience. In much the same way that I find programmes dealing with criminological issues not sufficiently highbrow, psychologists will have felt this of The Experiment. The 'serious' science from The Experiment will come in the future work of the experimenters, Haslam and Reicher, who commented to me that they had enough material from The Experiment to keep them in work until retirement.

Finally, the criticism that the participants were only there for their own gratification, '15 minutes of fame', and financial reward. All participants were paid £1000, for two week's work. For many, that was not a great deal more than they would have earned in their 'real world' employment. Some participants, such as Petkan, Bimpson and Quarry, did have important roles in The Experiment but others, such as Perry, did not. The Experiment will not provide the overnight 'fame' one could gain from programmes such as 'Big Brother'.

Conclusion — Television, Ethics and Incarceration

The BBC Prison Experiment was unusual in many ways, not least in the way in which the BBC — normally protective of its own powers — gave a power of veto to the Independent Ethics Panel.

The Experiment shows that ethics and popular television are not anathematic to one another. The two can go together to make interesting and stimulating television. The Report of the Independent Ethics Panel should provide a useful source of reference to producers, directors, and also to students of media and other related disciplines. Above all, The Experiment is an example of how things can be done right.

It was not, and was never intended to be, a realistic interpretation of British prisons. Equally, whilst a prison was chosen for the Stanford Experiment and for the BBC's Experiment, the dynamics of power and control could have been explored in the environment of a boarding school or military base. The choice of a penal institution, however, served two ends — it made it likely to feature well in television ratings for a crime-thirsty British audience, and gave *some* — albeit limited — insight into the sociology of imprisonment.

Despite my initial concern, I was pleased to have been a part of The Experiment. The Independent Ethics Panel was an essential part of the process, and the relationship between the Panel and the BBC was mutually beneficial. It will always be possible to find fault in any major project of this type, but from an ethical perspective, the BBC should be applauded for adopting such a pragmatic and enlightened approach to The Experiment.

'The Experiment' was shown on BBC2 in May.

The Report of the Independent Ethics Panel is online at

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/news/panel-report.pdf>

The Experiment is at <http://www.experimentethics.org.uk>